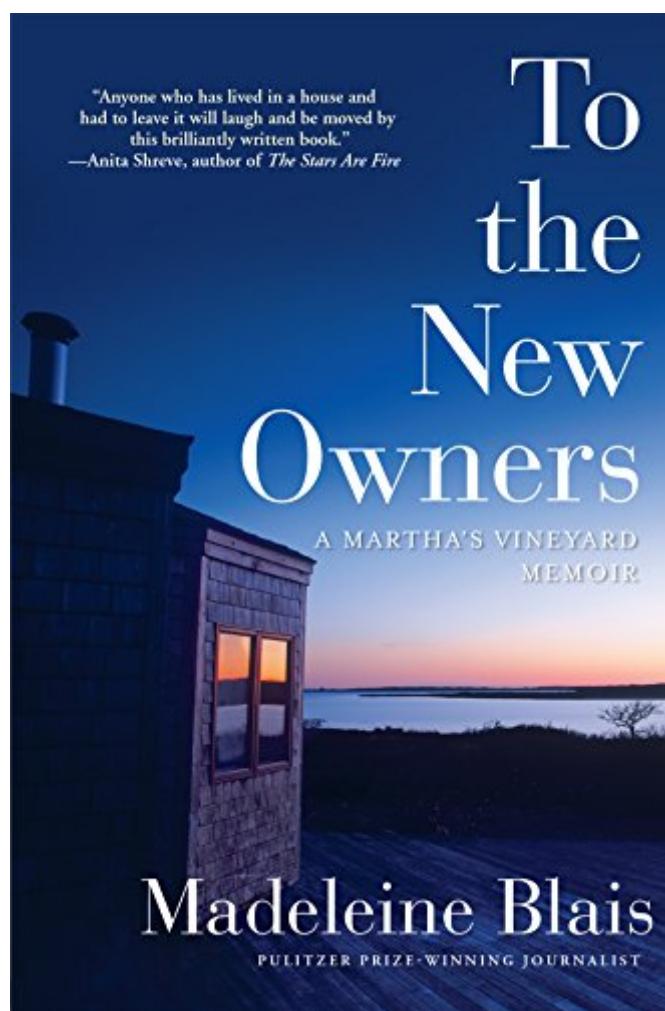


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# To The New Owners: A Martha's Vineyard Memoir



## **Synopsis**

In the 1970s, Madeleine Blaisâ™ in-laws purchased a vacation house on Marthaâ™s Vineyard for the exorbitant sum of \$80,000. 2.2 miles down a poorly marked, one lane dirt road, the house was better termed a shackâ "it had no electricity, no modern plumbing, the roof leaked, and mice had invaded the walls. It was perfect. Sitting on Tisbury Great Pondâ "well-stocked with oysters and crab for foraged dinnersâ "the house faced the ocean and the sky, and though it was eventually replaced by a sturdier structure, the ethos remained the same: no heat, no TV, and no telephone. Instead, there were countless hours at the beach, meals cooked and savored with friends, nights talking under the stars, until at last, the house was sold in 2014. To the New Owners is Madeleine Blaisâ™ charming, evocative memoir of this house, and of the Vineyard itselfâ "from the history of the island and its famous visitors to the ferry, the pie shops, the quirky charms and customs, and the abundant natural beauty. But more than that, this is an elegy for a special place. Many of us have one place that anchors our most powerful memories. For Blais, it was the Vineyard houseâ "a retreat and a dependable pleasure that also measured changes in her family. As children were born and grew up, as loved ones aged and passed away, the house was a constant. And now, the house lives on in the hearts of those who cherished it.

## **Book Information**

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## Customer Reviews

I bought this for my finches and they love it. Can't imagine it being large enough for a parrot unless it's a really small parrot.

Bitter sweet story with devastating ending. A cape cod camp is now an endangered species. Interesting, revealing secrets of Martha's Vineyard summer living.

Delightful.

Madeleine Blais wrote a sweet and loving portrayal of life on Martha's Vineyard in her memoir TO THE NEW OWNERS. She lucked out in the in-law department. Her mother-in-law Lydia King Phelps Stokes Katzenbach, an analyst and woman before her time, and father-in-law Nick Katzenbach, who served as U.S. Attorney General under President Kennedy, were both intelligent, warm, and family first people, who welcomed everyone to the home they bought on the pond years ago, as a summer retreat. Not simply a place to getaway, but a place to create memories and that they did. In this memoir, Blais describes the lay of the land. How true MV lovers appreciate and respect their neighbors and the unwritten rules, and what happens when they don't. I especially loved the anecdotes that she shared about frequent guests and good friend such as Phil Caputo. Caputo's wife Linda Ware, who was editor at Consumer Reports left the best log book notes Consumer Reports style. I also adored the logs that they kept in the house, which everyone wrote in as they left. These served as memories year after year of summers spent and how time changed. Some highlights are the visits to the great Katherine Graham's house and hers to theirs. While the memoir might seem that it is only a look into a privileged life and that is all, it is a peek into a family who loved one another and valued the importance of being together. Of a carefree time when carving two weeks out every summer was about more than relaxing. The Katzenbach house was no mansion, in fact in the first house (which was then revamped), there was no indoor plumbing, electricity, or even a telephone. The remodel prohibited TV and wifi, and encouraged enjoying the beach, reading, card games and one another. As the first generation grew older and unable to visit the house any longer, the second generation realized that the upkeep was no longer viable and it was best to sell the house. The book was a way of saying goodbye. Not just

goodbye to the house, but the memories it held and would sustain them the future.

I wanted to like this book more than I did. George Howe Colt's "The Big House" and Henry Beston's "The Outermost House" have probably set impossible standards in memoirs about seaside houses; in comparison, "To the New Owners" comes off as oddly dry and mostly fluff. I'm not sure why. Certainly the author has loads of raw material to work with: an old family house on a pond in Martha's Vineyard; a large, highly accomplished family (her father-in-law was attorney general under Johnson); decades of summer visits with equally accomplished friends. Ironically, perhaps it is the presence of all these high-profile people that sink the book; the name-dropping quickly becomes tedious. At one point I turned it into a game and started to count all the famous people she mentions; I stopped at 85 (Vernon Jordan, Carly Simon, Jim Belushi, Katharine "Kay" Graham, the Obamas, Michelle Pfeiffer, Princess Margaret, Tom Hanks, Steven Spielberg, all the Kennedys in excruciating detail, etc.). At one point the author's family must reluctantly turn down a dinner invitation that includes the Kissingers. A quote from one of the author's family's "logs" or guest books: "We've had delightful visits and fun with the Clintons at Kay Graham's, Jackie Onassis at her beach, and old friends at our house and around the island." One quickly gets the point: this is where the rich, the powerful, and the well-published go to play and associate with each other. Which leads me to the other major problem I had with "To the New Owners": the percentage of the book that is made up of quoted materials. Blais includes nearly entire chapters of entries from the cottage guest books in the mistaken belief that because they're written by such witty luminaries as Phil Caputo and a friend who writes for Consumer Reports we too will find them endlessly fascinating. This is one of those techniques where a little goes a long way. I eventually found myself skimming most of these. She also includes what appears to be an entire college application essay from one youthful visitor and pages of Ted Kennedy's Chappaquiddick defense statement, as well as long excerpts from published articles from various sources. The result feels like one of those research papers one writes in high school when one doesn't have a lot of original things to say. And that's too bad, because this book comes most alive when Blais describes her family and their more prosaic summer rituals in her own words. That's when she touches on the universal experience of summers past, families and friends, and the places that bring them together for a time. Her prose is that of a journalist, straightforward and short on the sort of descriptive transcendence found in the two books mentioned above, but it gets the job done. One reason it may be unfair to compare "To the New Owners" with Colt's "The Big House" is the length of time the authors spent each year at their summer houses; rather than spending entire

summers at the beach house as Colt did, Blais and her family went to Martha's Vineyard for only two weeks each year. This is certainly no criticism of Blais; few among us could manage more. But while two-week holidays scattered across the years provide snapshots of summer, they cannot capture the full arc of a season or provide the depth of knowledge of a place that more comprehensive stays do. At least that's the case here. In the end, that's what I came away with: a few snapshots of a witty, privileged family at play. There are worse ways to while away a few afternoons, but I had hoped for more.

I visited Martha's Vineyard one time in the 70's for about two weeks with extended family all meeting there. We had some great humorous experiences. Our teenagers met year round teens who told about watching or being an extra in Jaws. I remember walking with my dad along the beach and we were surprised to suddenly come to the nude beach. We immediately turned back being a bit embarrassed. I remember seeing where the well-worn old news bout Chappaquiddick took place; how it was attempted to make it seem like an "accident" having just taken a wrong turn from the main road leading to the ferry. The teens told funny stories to my teens, such as the time reporters ate berries that one of them had urinated on. I especially liked the booklet a captain's daughter had written about the chickens she cared for and loved, and learning some history in the graveyard. Liked Edgartown and the restaurants. Unicorns items were popular in the shops. I was hoping to find interesting experiences her family and friends had - not just a lot of name dropping and past old news happenings that were in all the news outlets years ago. Wanted to like it, but ended up just skimming and skipping through it.

Just lovely- a mini history of the vineyard and one family's plot of paradise told through vignettes of the famous and the infamous islanders of eras past, along with stories of just regular folk lucky enough to have a connection to the island.

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